

1 Building the Relationship Bridge

I felt all alone despite being surrounded by people. I knew no one, and no one knew me. I was sitting in a room with thirty other staff members. Some were new hires like me, some had enough years of experience to feel comfortable, and others were close to retirement. I felt a mix of exhilaration and fear as I started my first real full-time job following college.

I was entering the realm of workplace relationships.

That first day on the job not only did I feel unprepared to teach my inaugural class of third-grade students, but I also was keenly aware that I was going to need adult relational skills beyond what I had needed up to that point. There would be a whole new set of colleagues in my life. That initial work experience taught me the tremendous effect workplace relationships would have on my ability to do my job, not to mention their effect on my emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing.

I assumed that many of my new coworkers would be nice, but I really had no idea if any of them would like me or if I would enjoy being in their company. Some appeared to be friendly immediately. Others seemed to carry chips on their shoulders. I feared that some of them would make working as a team quite challenging.

I had thought making the curriculum come alive for elementary school children would be the hard part, but I began to suspect that working with the people in that room was going to be harder still. I was full of enthusiasm and naivety, though, so I jumped into my job and started forming new relationships.

During my six-year tenure at that school, I developed many strong relationships. Some coworkers became friends with whom I enjoyed after-work activities. I often had lunch with some of my coworkers, sharing bits of our lives with each other, but these relationships never extended beyond the walls of the workplace. Others were cool and congenial and simply putting in the time and effort to accomplish the work. I remember spending most of an evening rehashing an argument I had had with a coworker, trying to understand her point of view and what I should have said differently, fearing the next day's interaction. I shudder now as I look back at my weak relational skills during those first years in the workplace.

Throughout my subsequent positions over the years I have learned so much about working with people. It would certainly be wonderful to work in a healthy environment where issues were dealt with quickly and fairly. However, the reality is that our workplace relationships are often less than ideal. You may work in an environment in which you report to a boss who's difficult to respect. You may work with staffmembers who give a great effort this week only to conspire mutiny the next. Some of us work alongside peers who have such different personalities from what we're used to that it not only hampers our productivity but often drives us crazy. Our rela-

tionships with male coworkers may present their own set of challenges for our emotional wellbeing. The women we work with range from our best friends to our greatest foes.

The people we connect with at work have a tremendous impact on our job satisfaction, our ability to deliver results, and our overall emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. I've written this book to address a very real need: how can we build relationships in the workplace that are healthy and God-pleasing?

A Civil Engineer

I'm about as far as you can get from a scientific, analytical, engineer-type. I do okay balancing my checkbook, but talk to me about aerodynamics or metaphysics, and my eyes glaze over. Let me propose that in the workplace you take on the role of a "civil engineer."

The word "civil" refers to the citizens or individuals who belong to a society. When two individuals are in a relationship working for the same company or department, they belong to the same "society." Civil engineering is the discipline of designing, constructing, and maintaining both naturally and physically built environments, such as bridges. Metaphorically, our mandate as civil engineers is to design, build, and maintain relational bridges with coworkers.

The presenting problem is that we find ourselves on the opposite side of a relational chasm from the people with whom we work. In order to have a relationship, there needs to be a bridge that spans this relational expanse. Just as a civil engineer considers the environment and the application that a bridge will serve, likewise we must consider the person and the environment of the relationship as we choose the best method to construct a relational bridge.

Some bridges will develop naturally; others will take more time and effort. Some bridges can collapse, yet others withstand the torments and relational quakes that strike over time. No two bridges

are the same. Factors such as distance between shorelines, stability of the ground, and purpose of the bridge all affect their design. So it is in workplace relationships. We have associations that occur between a boss and staff, and we have peer interactions with both men and women. Some develop into lifelong friendships, while others stay superficial and aloof. At the very least we need to be congenial and professional in our relationships. Whatever the situation, a relationship requires a bridge to span the chasm that exists between us and the other person.

Start with the Foundation

When we begin a new job, we're faced with the daunting task of building relational bridges from the foundation up. Since no previous connections exist, we have the chance to start relationships afresh. We find ourselves wondering, *How will I ever get along with this person? How can I learn to relate to the people on this team so that I do my job to the best of my ability? My boss is a real mystery. How will I fill the demands that are placed on me?* As intimidating as it may seem to enter a workplace where everyone represents new relationships, the approach we take has the potential to prevent unhealthy relational patterns from forming.

When we've already been working with people for a period of time and the connection between us is not good, extra work will be needed to undo destructive relationship patterns. Identifying what is eroding the relationship is imperative to addressing the issues. Furthermore, we will need to make decisions as to what elements should be added to strengthen the connection.

Regardless of the kind of bridge that needs to be built—whether we're starting from scratch or doing repair work—the place to start is the foundation. There are many resources on best business practices and theories of building strong teams. There are also authors

who write from a psychological perspective to help us understand the people around us. While recognizing that these practices, theories, and perspectives have their places in relationship building, I do not use them as the material for laying a strong foundation. The relational foundation must be rooted in a relationship with God. I believe that Jesus' teachings on relationships can change the way we connect and will result in healthy workplace relationships.

At the risk of being dismissed by those who would say that this approach has nothing to offer and that it's another mindless example of "the right answer is always Jesus," I challenge you to open your heart to the biblical truths presented in these pages. These ideas surely didn't originate with me. They come out of the holy words of Scripture. When we put God in His rightful first place, ideology that follows biblical teaching will be affirmed.

If we were to epitomize God into one characteristic and the effect of His presence in our lives, it would come down to this: *love*. When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was most important, He reduced the list to "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-39).

Later in the New Testament, Paul makes this statement: "Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). The apostle John pinpoints it by saying, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). So when He pours himself into our receptive hearts, He pours in love. Think of this as the highest quality of cement that can be poured into pilings to create the firmest of foundations. God is never miserly with the amount of love He bestows on us. Our hearts can be overflowing with His love, and it's out of that spillage that we'll be full of love to pass on to our coworkers.

You may resist the idea of loving your coworkers when you can barely tolerate some of them. We love our parents, spouse, children, and best friends—but not all of our coworkers. The problem with this myopic view of giving love to only our closest relationships is the fact that Scripture commands us to pass on the love we have been given. Jesus went so far as to tell us to love our *enemies*. In the workplace that would include the terrible boss, the smelly or obnoxious man, the gossiping woman, the lazy new hire, and the ornery caretaker. How can we love chocolate or a new silk blouse but not the people God made in His own image? What can this God-love look like in the workplace?

I could fill many pages trying to describe love, but my attempts would be meager. So let's use 1 Corinthians 13 (*The Message*) to describe love in real life:

- Love is patient.
- Love is kind.
- It does not envy.
- It does not boast.
- It is not proud.
- It is not rude.
- It is not self-seeking.
- It is not easily angered.
- It keeps no record of wrongs.
- Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
- It always protects.
- Love always trusts.
- Love always hopes.
- Love always perseveres.

Here is the same list revised to apply to the workplace—the day-to-day reality of cubicles, company cafeterias, staff meetings, and business trips:

- Because I love the people I work with, I will never give up on them.
- I will care more for others at my workplace than for myself.
- Because I choose to love my coworkers, I will not want what they have.
- Because I care about my coworkers, I will not strut or brag about my successes.
- Because I care about my coworkers, I will not force myself or my ideas on others.
- Because I care about my coworkers, I will not insist that it is “me first.”
- Because I care about my coworkers, I won’t fly off the handle.
- Because I care about my coworkers, I will forgive them and not keep score of their wrongs against me.
- As a way of showing that I care, I will not revel when others grovel.
- As a way of showing that I care, I will take pleasure only in the truth.
- Even when it is really difficult, I will choose to put up with as much as is possible without compromising the workplace values or my responsibility.
- I recognize that care grows as I trust God.
- I choose to be careful with criticism by reserving it for constructive feedback, and I will show care by always looking for the best in others.
- Because I care, I will not allow myself to dwell on the past.
- With God’s help, I will not stop showing care for my coworkers.

I’ve interchanged the words *love* and *care* for a reason. In the workplace it’s seldom appropriate to express your love for your coworkers. For example, if we were to go above and beyond our prescribed workload to help out a coworker with a task, and he or she

were to ask why we had done so, it would probably not be fitting to say, “Because I love you.” But we could certainly let the person know that we saw how big the task was and that we were concerned that it was affecting his or her emotional and physical health. Because we wanted our coworker to succeed at the task to continue to be healthy, we chose to help him or her.

We don’t need to advertise that we love the people we work with or even that we’re trying to love them. Simply keeping our hearts open to God so that His love continues to fill our hearts, the overflow will give us the love we need to care for those around us. Our ability to care starts with a heart attitude and evidences itself in actions.

Create a Pier of Trust

Once we have the foundational relationship with God and are dependent on being filled with His love to pass on to others, we’re now ready to build a pier in the middle of the chasm. This pier is trust, and trust rests on the foundation of a relationship with God and the love it produces. It’s essential to all relationships, not only workplace relationships. Whether our relationship realities are with supervisors, staff, or peers, when we work with others we’re working as part of a team.

This quote from Patrick Lencioni’s *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* refers specifically to teams, which are the groups of people with whom we work:

Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Trust is the confidence among team members that their peers’ intentions are good and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group. In essence, teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another.¹

Lencioni goes on to say,

It is only when team members are truly comfortable being exposed to one another that they begin to act without concern for protecting themselves. As a result, they can focus their energy and attention completely on the job at hand, rather than on being strategically disingenuous or political with one another.²

He then gives a list of the attributes exhibited by members of trusting teams that has great similarity to the list of loving attributes from 1 Corinthians 13 that we just examined.

- Admit weakness and mistakes.
- Ask for help.
- Accept questions and input about their areas of responsibility.
- Give one another the benefit of the doubt before arriving at a negative conclusion.
- Take risks in offering feedback and assistance.
- Appreciate and tap into one another's skills and experiences.
- Focus time and energy on important issues, not politics.
- Offer and accept apologies without hesitation.
- Look forward to meetings and other opportunities to work as a group.³

Pouring love and care into our workplace relationships will create an environment where trust is built. Trust is the center pier that rests on our foundation of God and is the bridge that crosses the relational chasm. If we have not created an environment of trust, the relational bridge will collapse.

Erosive Factors

Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world. If we did, our interactions with others would always be healthy. There would be nothing threatening to undermine, break down, or destroy the relational bridge.

When designing a bridge, an engineer must consider the factors that will erode its foundation, placing a strain on the bridge. Relationally, there will be similar threatening dynamics at play, depending on whether we're interacting with the boss, employees, or male or female coworkers. Engineers are good at performing something called "root cause analysis." Where the general public sees a collapsed bridge and speculates whether the collapse was due to an overloaded truck or a careless design engineer, a knowledgeable engineer may be able to trace the collapse to the corrosion of many small rivets caused by not following the prescribed maintenance program.

I remember watching with horror the collapse of an interstate bridge spanning the Mississippi River in Minneapolis in 2007. It seemed inconceivable that a bridge could appear to be sturdy and fully functional and then crumble without warning, causing mayhem, destruction, and death. I also recall the powerful earthquake that shook the San Francisco Bay area in 1989, causing freeways and overpasses to collapse.

In both cases, on-location television reporters made profound statements about the magnitude of the mess that was unfolding and posed questions about how something so destructive could possibly have been avoided.

The same profound observation could also relate to our relationships. *Why are we so messed up?* *How did we get into such a relational mess?* One moment everything is seemingly fine; then suddenly the relational bridge starts to collapse. It may have been caused by something with the magnitude of an earthquake that shakes and even destroys the relationship. Conversely, it can be a small and seemingly insignificant chain that brings about the erosion and collapse.

In order to answer the question of why we're so messed up, we need to reenact the collapse of relationships at the beginning of time in the Garden of Eden. At creation God designed things to be in harmony. Adam and Eve had the perfect relationship, and they lived in harmony with God, each other, and nature. In this perfect environment God walked with them and poured His goodness and peace into them. It was paradise.

Then the fall occurred, and sin entered the equation. Instead of being open and receptive to allow the free flow between God and themselves, Adam and Eve became ashamed and withdrawn. Instead of being God- and other-focused, they became self-focused. Instead of being sinless and in perfect harmony with God, pride, deception, anger, judgment, and envy entered their relationships.

The fall created a significant shift in human interaction. This shift has caused a permanent fracture in our relationships that has caused the integrity of our relational bridges to be at risk.

The root cause analysis of our relational issues does not point to our work environment, our childhood deficiencies, or even the obnoxious people who work next to us. The root cause of relational issues is sin. We need first to ask God to search our own hearts to see if there's any wicked way in us and to show us the effect it has on our relationships. This is not easy, as our tendency is to see the issue as being the result of wicked ways in *others*.

Our own sin may not be the only contributor to the problem, because others also bring their sinfulness to the relational equation. This makes it very easy to collect evidence against and place the blame on someone else. It's also more comfortable to focus on others' faults than it is to focus on the good that God is working within them. However, until we can see more of the goodness of God within them than the sin within them, we'll have little desire to build a bridge to them. In effect, we place too little value upon them.

As we read Scripture and see the value that Christ placed on thieves, prostitutes, and liars, how can we, who are not God, place a lesser value on our coworkers than He? We need to pray the same prayer that King David penned: “Investigate my life, O God, find out everything about me; Cross-examine and test me, get a clear picture of what I’m about; See for yourself whether I’ve done anything wrong—then guide me on the road to eternal life” (Psalm 139:23-24, TM).

Toxic relational issues, caused by our sin as well as the sin of others, permeate our workplace and threaten to erode our relational bridges. They’re pervasive and real and can ruin our relationships, strip us of our emotional and spiritual health, and bring our careers to a halt. We must be prepared with a strategy that counters the effects of these relational issues. Just as our attempts to create a humanly contrived love will be deficient, so our attempts to fix our relationships will be meager at best. “God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again” (John 3:17, TM). That is a relational remedy—putting the world right again to counter the effects of sin.

Corrective Measures

Identifying the root problem and being offered a solution does not mean that healthy relational bridges are constructed. Simply considering a solution to the problem isn’t enough; it must be acted upon. “Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). An engineer knows that adding steel to a bridge can enhance its strength. How ludicrous it would be simply to add the steel as a decorative feature rather than as a means of improving its load-bearing capacity!

The absurdness of this decision is similar to what Christ spoke of at the end of his Sermon on the Mount. Here are His paraphrased words:

Why are you so polite with me, always saying “Yes, sir,” and “That’s right, sir,” but never doing a thing I tell you? These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, words to build a life on. If you work the words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who dug deep and laid the foundation of his house on bedrock. When the river burst its banks and crashed against the house, nothing could shake it; it was built to last. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a dumb carpenter who built a house but skipped the foundation. When the swollen river came crashing in, it collapsed like a house of cards. It was a total loss (*Luke 6:46-49, TM*).

God’s truth, when worked into our hearts, gives us the corrective measures to counteract sin. If we act upon the corrective measures He offers, we’ll experience relational change. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are listening when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!” (James 1:22, TM).

The Bridge That Jesus Built

God’s love is boundless, measureless, and fathomless. People who have never experienced the love of God are thirsty for it. We have it within us, not because of anything we have done to deserve it but simply because while we were yet sinners, Christ showed his great love for us by dying for the forgiveness of our sins (Romans 5:8). The chasm between a holy God and us, which was created by our sin, can be bridged only by Jesus. The design of this relational

bridge is in the shape of a cross. God does not desire that anyone would end this life on earth without having a relationship with Him. It is His intent that every person would choose to bridge the chasm by accepting the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. If you're reading this and know that the chasm between you and God remains, ask for His forgiveness, and accept the gift of love He offers. It's that simple. Confess. Accept. Believe.

You'll hear a lot about Esther, who lived more than twenty-one centuries ago, in this book. You'll also hear from many twenty-first-century women who are our counterparts today. Though Esther and women of today are of two different times and two different cultures, the synergy in their stories is remarkable. Esther took on the challenges of life, as you and I do; Esther knew the sting of hardship and heartache, as you and I do; Esther knew what it was like to face fear and to make risky decisions that required more of her than she knew she had, as you and I do.

You and I and Esther have all found ourselves in roles and situations we never expected. We represent thousands—even millions—of women down through the ages who have taken on relational workplace challenges that threatened to undo them. Instead of allowing life to defeat us, though, we accept the challenge to courageously rise and make a difference.

The Story of Esther

Many of the biblical examples I have chosen come from the story of Esther. She was a culturally displaced orphan who became a queen, living more than twenty-one centuries ago. You may protest that Esther has nothing of value to say to women who have put in a great deal of hard work to accomplish the real jobs we go to each day. Our reality opposes this beauty queen. One woman responded to the notion of looking at Esther as a role model by candidly query-

ing, “Can you tell me why you think Esther is a model for women in the workplace today? I can see her having something to say to contestants on ‘The Bachelor,’ and I admire Esther’s courage, but the rest seems like a stretch between cultures. How many times are we called to hang our enemies, sleep with the boss, or start a massacre?”

I would encourage you to read the story of Esther with an open mind and heart to discover how she handled the dilemmas of her life and the impact her decisions had on her relationships. Esther’s workplace included a foster home, a palace, a royal bedroom, and a divided nation. However, her job as queen of Persia need not be any more significant in the course of history than your present work situation.

Modern-day Esthers

Alongside Esther are you and me. We represent millions of women down through the ages who have taken on the challenge of developing strong relationships and through this have impacted our worlds. We will spend time discovering, learning from, and celebrating our stories. These stories could be your story.

I have had a variety of working relationships throughout my life. I’ve worked with farm laborers; cared for the elderly and disabled beside cleaning and nursing staff; taught alongside teachers in Canada, Haiti, and Africa; ministered next to pastoral staff in small and mega churches; and have partnered with a variety of professional speakers, marketers, and publications staff. Apart from writing and speaking, I presently volunteer with a ministry—Professional Women’s Network—that encourages women who work within the corporate environment to deepen their relationships with God and others. Some of my roles have been quite monotonous and other

times technically demanding. The element that kept these jobs interesting, successful, and enduring was relationships.

I would love to be able to report that every workplace relationship I've been involved in has been strong and life-giving. But I, like you, have struggled to make these relationships healthy. As I recall the many and varied people I have worked with, I hold a mixture of joy and regret. However, hope comes in allowing God to work change in my heart that transforms me to be more like Him. Then, as I act upon the opportunities He presents to build relational bridges, connections with people develop where previously there was an unapproachable chasm. This creates the opportunity for a positive relational legacy.

Many times I've foolishly thought the impact was only on my life, but in retrospect I can see that God placed me in those positions "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). We've all been given skills and abilities to equip us to fulfill our calling to accomplish a task and to build relational bridges. As our relationships with God become more intimate, we'll be spurred on to see our relationships with others deepen, thus prompting them to open up to God (Matthew 5:16, TM). Deeper relationship with God and with others is our ultimate calling.

In the chapters that follow, we'll investigate five sins—pride, deception, anger, judgment, and envy—and the devastating effects they have on relationships. Each of these patterns of relating, which were inherited from Adam and Eve, will erode the foundation of God's plan. If left unchecked, they can even destroy relationships.

But there's hope. Scripture offers corrective measures that, if applied to our relationships, will build and maintain healthy relationships.

Verses to Study

Matthew 22:37-39

1 Corinthians 13:13

James 1:22

1 John 4:16

Romans 5:8

John 3:17

Esther 4:4

James 17-26

Matthew 5:16

Questions for Reflection

1. Identify people from your past or present workplace or place of volunteering or community with whom you've had a difficult relationship. Attempt to make a list that identifies the issues that they brought to the relationship and the issues you contributed. Remember that issues will come from both sides.
2. Identify what part of showing loving care to your coworkers is difficult. Where do you feel a resistance to this principle?

3. What do you do in your workplace relationships that prompts others to open up to you?